DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 241 234 RC 014 655

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TITLE Housework: A Changing Constant.
PUB DATE Feb 84
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the American Farmwomen in Historical Perspective Conference (Las Cruces, NM, February, 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Rearing; Economic Change; Extension Education; Family Environment; Family Financial Resources; Family Life; Farm Labor; *Females; Homemakers; Males; *Rural Farm Residents; *Sex Role; *Social Change; Social Environment; *Social History; United States History
IDENTIFIERS *Farm Women; *Housework

ABSTRACT

The paper contrasts housework done by farmwomen of 1900 with that done by today's farmwomen. The drudgery of turn-of-the-century housework, particularly doing the washing is detailed. The fact that the family farm was seen as a partnership based on strict division of labor is noted. Changes in farm life from 1920 to the present are documented, including a 1929 criticism of the small amount of time farmwomen could spend in child training. The advent of Cooperative Extension agents and Homemakers Clubs to educate farmwomen as alternatives to traditional, time-consuming ways of doing things is discussed. Changes in farm housework and farmwork are described; and, fears are expressed that today's farmwomen may have lost their traditional role of domestic providers, and become invisible in a new role where they spend less time on housework and more time on farmwork and off-farm work. (MH)

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Paper delivered at American Farmwomen in Historical Perspective Conference
Las Cruces, New Mexico, February 1984

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HOUSEWORK: A CHANGING CONSTANT

For centuries, in fact forever, so far as we know, housework has been the lifework of women. Childbearing and housework are the two activities which all women, all over the world, of all races, classes and historical times, have shared. They are our great common experiences. Yet until just a few years ago, housework, the great constant, was not something that any historians, scientists, philosophers or "great thinkers"--all men--bothered to think about, for the simple reason that housework was "women's work." Housework was taken for granted and seemed too unimportant to study. Recently, however, precisely because it has been women's work, housework has attracted the attention of women's historians. We now have a number of books and articles, and we can expect that number to continue to grow.[1]

What is housework? I define it as the life support activities which sustain human life: provision of the necessary food, clothing, shelter, physical comfort and security essential to life. What I have just said goes far beyond the simple provision of physical necessities and encompasses emotional nurturing activity as well. So it has been for most women: they have "made a home" for their families, and that has always meant something more than just getting food on the table three times a day. For most of us housework occurs within our loving families, and the work and the love are all mixed up together. So it is that housework is "a labor of love" for those we care about and why it is so hard for many people to think of housework in economic terms.

But housework is work, frequently more demanding and physically tiring than many office jobs. Furthermore, for many women, homemaking

is a lifework, in the same way a professional career is, for example, to a lawyer. It is the goal of women's history to discover, explore, and publicize women's lifework and activities.

Since 1900 housework has changed fundamentally. Although we still do the same things: we cook, we wash, we clean, we sew, the meaning of those activities is completely different from what it was eighty-three years ago. Women's traditional lifework has changed. In this paper I want to explore what that means for the American farmwoman.

The housework of farm women is more visible than that of urban women. On the family farm, some factors which urban life obscures are still clear. Farm women see themselves as sharing in the family enterprise--partners, they usually call themselves--in ways that urban women no longer do. Farmwomen have viewed their housework as a contribution to the farm enterprise. Their domestic activity which provided the family with most of its food and clothing outside the wage economy--using her labor power rather than cash purchase--has only recently disappeared from American farms.

Think of a farm in 1900. However prosperous the farm may have been, it lacked a number of things. It didn't have electricity and it didn't have indoor plumbing. Water ran only to the pump in the backyard, stoves were wood-burning, lighting was by kerosene lamp, food stayed cold in root cellars and deep in wells, and outhouses were the general rule. Farm equipment was powered by horses, not by the gasoline engine. Among other things the presence of horses meant that the farmwoman fought a constant battle against dirt, barnyard muck and flies, and she needed to be constantly vigilant for the safety of young children around large animals. Connections with the world off the farm still

depended on horsepower as well. Roads were unpaved dirt which turned to mud in the spring. Radio and telephone were still in the future.

For both physical and economic reasons, the farm family needed to be self-sufficient to survive. The goal was to be self-sufficient in food. Large vegetable gardens, berry patches, chickens and milk cows were customary, as was home butchering and the smoking, drying, storing, and canning of as much food as possible. Almost all of this was women's work. Even on the largest and most prosperous farms, self-sufficiency was cherished, and the housewife who organized hired girls to do all this activity frequently achieved a great deal of community status as a splendid housekeeper.

But what of the wife of the smaller, less prosperous farmer? Her role was, if anything, more essential, for her provision of food and clothing meant that scarce money could be spent on items necessary for the farm enterprise. Today, when we speak of urban families, we sometimes call the man the "breadwinner" because he has the paying job which brings in the cash necessary for the family to buy what it needs. On the farm of 1900, it would be accurate to call the farmwoman, if not the breadwinner, certainly the breadgiver, for she supplied the food and saved the cash for other uses.

Women knew what a contribution their housework made to the farm. They had a crucial role to play; they were indeed partners in the farm enterprise.

Furthermore, the housework of farm women was a source of skill and pride. Cooking a loaf of bread in a wood-burning oven requires much more experience and attention to detail than does baking with an electric stove. For most of us, a return to traditional baking methods would mean

learning some skills lost to us today.

An even clearer example is provided by the case of washing. Before the modern washing machine and the detergents that accompanied it, washing was a complex, multi-stage process. First you made the soap; although the basic ingredients were grease and ashes, individual recipes offered endless variation. One constant, however, was the pride of the housewife in producing a good soap. On washday, care in sorting and laundering of different fabrics was essential, for many colors ran in the wash or faded in the drying process. White clothes required special treatment, usually presoaking, then boiling, scrubbing, and the addition of blueing. Truly, the production of a "snowy white wash" was something to be proud of!

But this is not all of the story. Although the housework of farm women was a source of skill and pride, it was at the same time wearing physical drudgery. In 1892, Addie Diggs, a Kansas Populist, penned an indelible portrait of the farm woman:

> Farm life for women is a treadmill. The eternal climb must be kept up though the altitude never heightens. For more than a quarter of a century these churning, washing, ironing, baking, darning, sewing, cooking, scrubbing, drudging women, whose toilsome, dreary lives were unrelieved by the slight incident or by-play of town life, felt that their treadmills slipped cogs. Climb as they would, they slipped down two steps while they climbed one. They were not keeping pace with the women of the towns and cities.[2]

The physical labor in doing the weekly wash is a good example. Water had to be brought from well or pump to boilers on the stove, where it was heated, then transferred to tubs for the actual washing and rinsing. Sometimes, after the wash was done, some of the water was used to scrub the kitchen floor. Finally then, in the end, the water was taken outside and thrown away. A woman could easily use 50 gallons of water

each washday. At a weight of eight pounds per gallon, that means 400 pounds of water. Then of course there was the actual scrubbing on the board, the physical effort of wringing out the clothes, the journey with the wet wash to the clothes line, and finally the hanging out. After all that, instead of a rest, it was probably time to make dinner! Needless to say, not only was housework physically draining, but it was very time-consuming. A statewide study conducted in Washington in 1929 showed that even with substantial help from her children and husband, the average farm woman worked 63 hours a week, 53 in homemaking tasks and ten in farmwork.[3] Numbers like this are common to other surveys done in other states in the 1920s.

What I have just briefly described is a portrait of the traditional farm as it existed throughout rural America, until about 1940. On family farms, work and family overlapped, as they no longer did for most urban families. Rather than being separated from the enterprise, women felt part of it, although their contribution was different from that of the men. The family farm was seen as a partnership based on strict division of labor. As one woman put it, "The barn is his, the house is mine."[4] Many women did "help out" in farm activities, as they still do today, but no matter how much farmwork they actually did, there was always the housework to be done. The household activities of women, and especially the cooking and processing of food was of direct economic value, for it sustained the laborers in the enterprise, that is, the operator and especially the hired hands, who were offered board and room rather than wages. Therefore, food preparation ought to be considered as a direct contribution to the farm enterprise; if we do this, we can re-estimate that in 1929 the farm woman spent 36 hours a week in farm work in the most general sense,

rather than the ten hours credited to her in the housework survey. No wonder she felt like a partner!

Nevertheless, by the 1920s, farm life was no longer the American ideal. Farming was not particularly profitable in the 1920s and the 1930s, and farm families lacked many of the modern conveniences, such as electricity, that townsfolk already took for granted. Furthermore, important national surveys, conducted by the Department of Agriculture and other groups, focussed particularly on the poor circumstances for women and children. An influential USDA report, published in 1916, described farm women as isolated and materially deprived. The report went on to note that technological change had benefited the farm, but not the household. Farm women lacked labor-saving machinery.[5] Farmers were eagerly buying new equipment, including the new gasoline-engine tractors which were to revolutionize agriculture. In the meantime, farm women were still churning, washing and ironing as they had always done.

Literature critical of farm families raised another, perhaps more important, issue, that of child welfare. Repeatedly one finds the statement that farm children were expected to do too much farm and household work, and that as a result they were too tired to appreciate the finer things of life. The Washington State household survey of 1929 noted that the farm woman spent, on an average, less than 30 minutes per day with each of her children, and went on to comment:

> The many duties of the farm homemaker make it impossible for her to spend as much time in child training as the modern educator would recommend.[6]

In effect, then, by the 1920s, traditional farm life was under attack from many sources, all of which were determined to bring farm families into the "mainstream" of American life. This did indeed occur, spurred by

technological changes whose impact was beginning to be felt by the 1930s. Farm families--or what is left of them--have indeed been brought into the mainstream of American life.

Let me describe to you what this mainstreaming has meant for farm women.

First, the good news. Modern home appliances have taken the drudgery out of housework. Electrification, which came to many farms in the 1930s, brought many changes: electric stoves, refrigerators and freezers, vacuum cleaners and washing machines. Who among us would trade today's washer and dryer for our grandmother's boiler and scrub-board? Or our electric steam iron for a heavy sad iron? The new domestic appliances ended heavy physical labor, were much more convenient, provided alternatives to customary practices, saved time and increased productivity. In the change from the old, traditional ways of doing things to modern ways, Cooperative Extension agents and Homemakers Clubs played a vital part. Extension bulletins and demonstrations explaining new methods such as canning with a pressure cooker, freezing, and laundering have helped women all over the country.

There are several other less positive aspects of modern domestic technology. The major one is that technology has stripped most household tasks of any particular skill. Consider the change which has occurred in laundry methods. To produce a "snowy, white wash" as I mentioned earlier, used to require a number of carefully-executed steps. Today a wash can be done any time of the day or night: washing and drying require only two loadings and unloadings, the addition of a quantity of detergent, the setting of two dials and the pressing of two switches and, of course, a washer and a dryer. Any ten year old child can accomplish

this task during the commercial breaks in his or her favorite television program.

Second, the new domestic technology, both within the household and without, fostered a new attitude. Women needed to know about the many new products and techniques for washing, cleaning and cooking. As they developed the necessary consumer awareness, other changes undermined the old self-sufficient mentality. Automobiles and paved roads ended much rural isolation and it also made the development of the supermarket and mass commercialization possible. Where these two trends met was in the farm woman's kitchen and refrigerator, now stocked with store-purchased rather than home-grown and processed food. The economics of mass production favor the supermarket chain over the local home producer. Of course many people still can and freeze today because they prefer the taste, but today commercial sources of food compete successfully with home production. The shift from the old ways to the new is captured in this quote:

> In those days everybody on a farm worked. But you didn't think about it being hard work. It was just something that had to be done,...the natural order of things. Its different now. If we had very many men (at harvest), we'd probably take them to the Burger Chef, or some place.

This leads me to the largest and most significant change of all. Housework has changed because farming has changed. Today's farmer is not self-sufficient. His business is mechanized, marketized and capitalized in ways his grandfather could never have imagined. Specialization and technological sophistication of mechanical equipment has been accompanied by specialization of seed, fertilizer, tillage, pesticide, feed, and so on. Today's farmer must depend on expert advice in all of these fields, and in tax matters, commodity futures and marketing as well. His horizons

have expanded immensely in just a generation.

In contrast, the traditional domestic world of the farmwoman has shrunk. Even though modern technology has made today's farm housewife much more productive and versatile than her mother, the changing context has robbed this gain of the meaning it might have had.

Let us look at the ways in which these changes occurred.

In my area, between 1925 and 1950, there was a massive and rapid change from man and horsepower to large, expensive machines. In just a few short years, the horses were gone, and so were the hired men who helped to take care of them. Harvest pictures, a favorite regional genre, provide a rich documentary record of the change. Harvest pictures from the 1910s and 1920s show crowds of men and lots of horses. Beginning in the 1930s, the numbers of individuals shrink and the machinery begins to grow in size. A contemporary harvest photo shows a huge self-propelled combine looming over only three people: the combine operator, the driver of the grain truck, and the go-fer, the person who goes to town to get machine parts when needed (often the farm wife).

As farming mechanized, it also marketized, in ways that contradicted traditional rural values. When my region was a new frontier in the 1880s, the individual effort of homesteading was complemented by neighborliness. Because everyone had so little, they had to share--labor, tools, medical knowledge, gossip. This tradition of sharing, although fading, was still alive in the harvests of the 1920s. The tractor rapidly obviated the need for neighborly sharing of horses, equipment, and manpower that had characterized the horse-farming harvest. Now, dependent only upon his own mechanical equipment and one or two hired men, the farmer could harvest at the optimum moment, without having to wait his neighborly

turn. For the first time, then, the individual farmer felt that he had the freedom of independent choice. And so indeed he did, but he paid for it--literally. Farm machinery became larger, more complex and efficient, and more specialized--and much more expensive.

Today, farming practice is mechanized and modernized. Machines have replaced manpower, and the farms that survived are part of the modern economic system.

In the meantime, housework was transformed. As I noted earlier, the new domestic appliances ended heavy physical labor. I'm convinced that immense improvement in women's physical health was one great benefit, though I've never seen this documented. In economic terms, something else happened: the new appliances saved time and speeded up processes. In other words, the productivity of the housewife was greatly increased. But--and this is the great but--productivity for what? To do more housework, and if so, for whom? This is a question that all women, urban and rural, have faced since the 1950s. Many women have used modern appliances and convenience foods to shorten the time they spend in housework and to use that time somewhere else. For many women, first priority went to improving the quality of domestic life. Increasingly, however, both urban and farm women have taken jobs in the paid labor force. A large number of farm women now work off the farm in either part or full-time occupations. Comprehensive national figures are hard to come by, but it seems that perhaps as high as 50% of today's farm women hold jobs off the farm--almost as high a percentage as the number of men who hold off-farm jobs.

A 1980 survey of farm families in Florida illustrated the new shape of life. The contemporary farm woman spent 26 hours a week on housework

--down from the 53 hours recorded in the 1929 Washington survey. She also spent 22 hours a week on farmwork--up 12 hours from the 1929 figures. Today's woman also averages 17 hours a week on off-farm work, whereas her 1929 counterpart had none. This all adds up to a total today of 66 hours a week, compared to the 63 hour total of 1929.[8] In other words, the work load remains the same, but how it is distributed has changed dramatically.

Today's farmwoman has lost a traditional role--the formerly crucial one of domestic provider--and has not yet found a new one. She is often the unacknowledged partner in the actual farmwork, but whatever else she does, she still does the housework. She does double duty. Furthermore, the new nonsexist work role is not yet generally recognized and acknowledged in the male-dominated field of agriculture. Most Cooperative Extension programs are still trying to teach the farmwomen canning, freezing, and baking; most male farmers do not fully credit the "help" they get from their wives; and most importantly, most farmwomen are not legal co-owners of the farm property with their husbands. The question is, is this a temporary transitional state of affairs, or will farmwomen lose an old role only to become invisible in a new one?

FOOTNOTES

1. This new literature includes Natalie J. Sokoloff Between Money and Work: The Dialectics of Women's Home and Market Work (New York: Praeger 1981), Ruth Schwartz Cowan, "The Industrial Revolution in the Home: Household Technology and Social Change in the 20th Century" Tecnhology and Culture 17 (January 1976), Susan Strasser, Never Done (NY: Panetheon, 1982), Ann Oakley, Woman's Work: The Housewife, Past and Persent (NY: Random House, 1976), Meg Luxton More Than a Labor of Love (Toronto: Women's Press, 1981), Sue Armitage "Household Work and Childrearing on the Frontier: The Oral History Record: Sociology and Social Research 6:3, 467-474. See also Nona Glaser "Housework: A review Article" Signs Summer 1976.

2. Annie Diggs, "Women of the Farmers' Alliance" The Arena 6 (1982), p. 161.

3. Inez Arnquist and Evelyn Roberts The Present Use of Work Time of Homemaker Bulletin No. 234, Washington State College Experiment Station, Pullman, WA July 1929.

4. Edna Cochrane, Potlatch, Idaho, interviewed by Idaho Rural Women's Oral History Project, 1975. Tapes deposited in Library Archives, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho.

5. USDA, Social and Labor Needs of Farm Women, Report No. 103, 1916, quoted in Baxandall, Gordon and Reverby, America's Working Women (New York: Random House, 1976) p. 153.

6. The Present Use of Work Time, p. 18.

7. Marie Clark, Decatur County, Indiana, quoted in Eleanor Arnold, Feeding Our Families. (Indiana Extension Homemakers Assn., 1983).

8. Christina Gladwin, "Off-Farm Work and Its Effect on Florida Farm Wives' Contribution to the Family Farm," Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, 1981.